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Chad: Geographic Perspectives on a Country in Conflict

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Chad: Geographic Perspectives on a Country in Conflict

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*Information available as of 18 August 1983
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This paper was prepared by [redacted] Africa-
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Chad: Geographic Perspectives on a Country in Conflict

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The current war in Chad underscores bitter regional and ethnic discords that have plagued that impoverished country since before its independence from France. The pattern of outside intervention in Chad's internal conflicts is also an old one. As in the past, the military and insurgency activities now under way in Chad are strongly affected by the harsh physical environment, long distances between supply points, lack of good roads, and great ethnic diversity. This study briefly analyzes the key geographic factors that make Chad subject to internal strife and vulnerable to outside meddling; it also focuses on those aspects of the environment that influence current military operations.

The War in Brief

The latest round of fighting began in May 1983 when Libyan-backed Chadian rebels, moving out of bases in the Tibesti Mountains, managed in two months to overrun the country as far south as Abeche. President Habre launched a counteroffensive and regained control of the area up to the key oasis of Faya-Largeau in late July. But, after a brief lull in operations caused by heavy rains in the south and sandstorms in the north, the rebels and Libyans recaptured Faya-Largeau and Oum Chalouba. By mid-August, French aircraft and substantial numbers of French troops were being introduced on the government's side and deployed to defend the south. N'Djamena is now ringed with French anti-aircraft missiles to deter attacks by Libyan fighter-bombers. In addition to the French, Zairian troops have also been sent to help the Chadian Government. The rebel forces are supported by thousands of Libyan Army regulars.

Ethnic Diversity

Deeply ingrained prejudices and antagonisms are at the root of much of Chad's civil strife. The country has been an area of convergence for peoples and cultures for centuries. Chad's nearly 5 million inhabitants belong to 12 major ethnic groups and 240 subgroups—each with its own traditions and way of life. These can be grouped into three broad categories—white Muslims, black Muslims, and non-Muslim blacks.

The white Muslims represent about one-fifth of the population and include Bedouin Arabs together with the racially mixed Arabized Toubou and Fulani tribal groups. Fiercely independent, these nomadic peoples of the north hold the southern blacks and sedentary people in general in contempt. They maintain a rigid code of social stratification from privileged nobility to outcast. Goukouni Weddeye, former President of

20th Century Chronology of Chad

- 1900 *France proclaims protectorate over Chad.*
- 1908 *Chad incorporated into French Equatorial Africa.*
- 1920 *Chad becomes separate French colony.*
- 1946 *Chad made one of four constituent territories of French Equatorial Africa.*
- 1959 *Chad becomes an autonomous republic within the French community.*
- 1960 *Chad achieves independence (north under French military administration until 1964).*
- 1965 *Conflicts begin between government and Muslim dissidents.*
- 1973 *Libya occupies Chad's Aozou Strip, claiming the territory as its own.*
- 1979 *Accord reached between warring factions in Chad; Transitional Government of National Unity (GUNT) formed.*
- 1980 *Civil war resumes; rebels under Habre defeated following Libyan intervention.*
- 1981 *Libyan forces withdraw from Chad.*
- 1982 *Habre's rebels oust GUNT; new government established with Habre as President.*
- 1983 *Libyan-backed rebels under Goukouni Weddeye take northern Chad by mid-August.*

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Chad and now a leader of the rebel forces, is a nobleman of the Teda clan of the Toubou tribe; his power base is in the Tibesti area. President Habre is also a Toubou tribesman, but from the Daza clan. Born in Faya-Largeau, the son of a shepherd of unknown ancestry, he is a charismatic, highly intelligent, Paris-educated leader. His strongest support is drawn from the Toubou and related tribes, but he has also gained the backing of many black Muslims in the areas of Biltine, Abeche, and the Sudan border.

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Black Muslims, making up about one-fourth of the total population, are concentrated in the south-central part of the country between Abeche and N'Djamena. Some groups are nomadic, but most combine limited livestock herding with farming and live in permanent villages. Racially they range from Negroid through varying degrees of mixed Negroid-Caucasoid. They are much less rigid in their observance of the caste system than their Arab counterparts.

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The blacks, who are Christians or animists, account for more than half of the population. Known as southerners, they are densely concentrated in southwestern Chad. Most are sedentary subsistence farmers living in dispersed, self-contained villages. The southerners consider themselves egalitarian and non-competitive. The Sara, largest of the tribes, became under French rule the best educated, most modernized, and politically strongest tribal group in Chad. Northern Muslim resentment at having been excluded from the mainstream of the nation's political and economic life is a major element in the animosity between the two groups; southern fear of Muslim domination is the other side of the coin. Blacks remember the days of the slave trade, when raids from the north decimated their population.

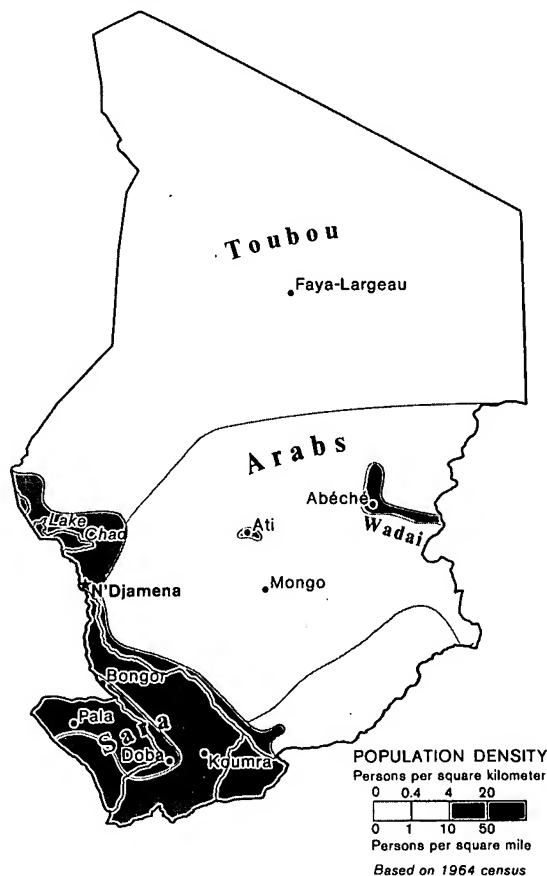
Weak Economy and Poorly Developed Resources

Chad is one of the poorest countries in the world, with a per capita annual income of slightly more than \$100. It is heavily dependent on outside aid. In addition to chronic instability and depressed markets, constraints to development in Chad include harsh environmental conditions, an inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of human resources. Since 1966 there have been 11 severe droughts, many affecting the entire country. Even if productivity improved, Chad's landlocked position and sparse transportation network would retard development. The nearest port to N'Djamena, the capital, is more than 1,000 kilometers away, there are no railroads, and only a few of the roads are paved. About 85 percent of the population is illiterate, and there is a severe shortage of professional and technical workers.

Civil strife has caused an already weak economy to deteriorate. Export revenues fell from \$106 million in 1977 to \$55 million in 1982. The economy is based on agriculture—which is concentrated in the south. Cotton, the principal export commodity, earns 80 percent of the revenues, while meat, livestock, and fish account for most of the rest. Industry is confined to food processing, cotton, and textiles.

Although the Aozou Strip along the Libyan border in the north is sometimes described by the news media as "mineral rich," little is actually known about the country's natural resources. Security problems since independence have precluded a thorough exploration for minerals. Salt is mined around Lake Chad, and uranium, gold, bauxite, chrome, and copper are known to exist. Oil is found in places, but the construction of a pipeline from the fields to N'Djamena has been delayed because of the current war.

Population and Ethnic Groups

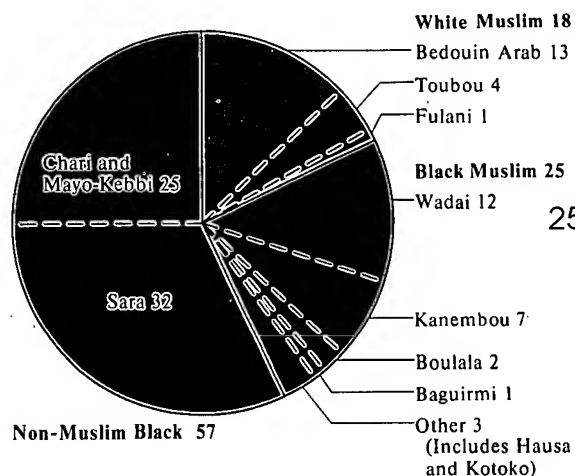


Arabs Selected ethnic group

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Major Ethnic Groups

Percent



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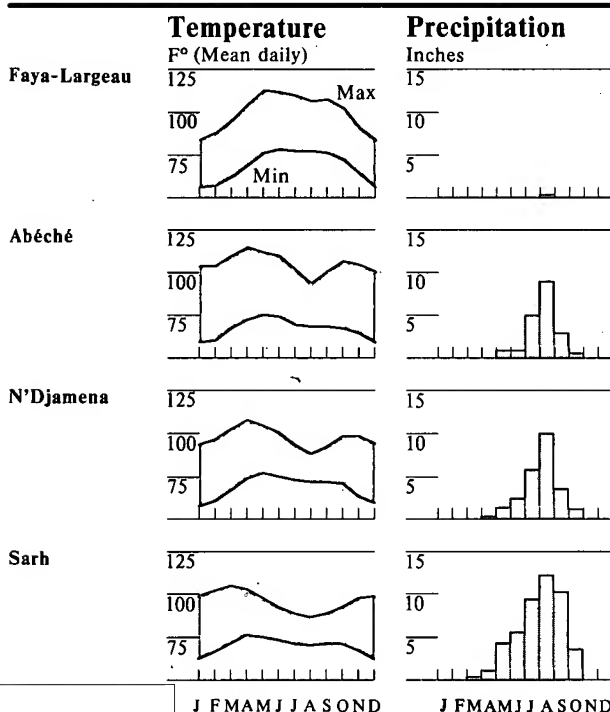
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Cross-Country Movement Conditions

Geographic and Logistic Factors
Affecting Military Operations

Chad's size (twice that of Texas), landlocked position, distance from major military supply centers, paucity of internal transportation facilities, and harsh physical environment pose difficult problems for military operations—particularly those involving large forces that must be sustained over long periods of time. Some of these factors show considerable regional and seasonal variation:

- Chad extends from the Sahara Desert in the north to the humid tropics in the south; thus, although temperatures are high throughout the country all year, there are pronounced wet and dry seasons only in the south.
- Large areas in both northern and southern Chad are flat-to-rolling plains that are generally suitable for off-road movement by vehicles. In the south, however, these areas become briefly impassable following rains.
- Chad's great interior distances—1,770 kilometers north to south and 1,050 kilometers east to west—and poor roads make logistic support for large-scale military operations difficult; these factors would become more important if government forces were to move to the far north or if Libyan forces were to advance into southern Chad.

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The North. Conventional ground operations are practical, although frequently difficult, over the flat-to-rolling plains that make up most of the northern two-thirds of the country. Exceptions occur where vehicles traveling cross-country must bypass rocky outcrops or steep-sided wadis and where movement is slowed by patches of loose sand. Off-road movement, even by foot troops, is virtually impossible in the rocky Tibesti uplands near the Libyan border, where the higher mountains reach elevations over 3,000 meters, and farther south where a broad belt of sand dunes stretches across the country northeastward from Lake Chad.

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From September through May the desert area north of the latitude of Abeche is scorched by hot, dry winds from the north or east. Extreme daytime temperatures occasionally reach 50° C (120° F). Skies are usually cloudless, but visibility may be severely reduced for two to five days by dust-laden winds (*harmattan*), which are most prevalent from November through March. Local duststorms and sandstorms covering much smaller areas also occur. From June through

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August this area receives moister winds from the southwest that bring more clouds and slight and irregular rainfall. []

Throughout northern Chad, water for military operations is scarce; wadis flow and temporary lakes form for only short periods in July and August. The far north may go for as long as two years at a time with no surface water available, although some water is provided by wells in oases. Most of northern Chad lacks vegetation except for scattered areas of desert shrubs and occasional tufts of grass. Exceptions are widely spaced oases, which contain date palms, and wadis, lined with dwarf trees and shrubs; but even these areas could offer concealment for only small groups. []

The South. Cross-country vehicular movement is usually feasible on the plains of southern Chad. Some places are briefly impassable after heavy rains, and others—along major streams, for example—may be seasonally inundated and impassable for longer periods. In the hilly uplands (elevations mostly between 600 and 1,500 meters) north and south of Abeche, off-road vehicular movement is precluded in many areas by steep slopes and rocky outcrops. []

In southern Chad the dry season—November through April—is shorter, cloudier, and rainier than in the north. Haze associated with airflow from the north or east causes visibility problems similar to those in the north, and smoke from brush fires adds to poor visibility in March and April. During the wet season, moist southerly winds bring heavy rainfall, particularly from July through September. Widespread cloudiness moderates daily high temperatures. Ground visibility is good except during showers. []

The plains of southern Chad are crossed by the perennial Chari and Logone Rivers and several of their tributaries, and water supplies for military operations are much larger than in the north. Seasonal flooding that would halt most military operations occurs along and between the streams from early May through November; during the low-water period from early December through April, small tributaries may become a series of pools. The size of shallow Lake Chad (about 1 to 4 meters deep) varies considerably; during the dry season, large marginal areas become exposed mud flats, stagnant pools, or marshes, particularly along the lower stretches of the major feeder streams. Scrubby woods and grasslands covering roughly the southern third of Chad afford good concealment where the vegetation is tall and dense. []

Roads

Chad's road network is sparse, unevenly distributed, and would not support sustained heavy military traffic. Most improved roads link towns in the south or radiate from the capital. Only about 250 kilometers of roads leading to N'Djamena are hard surfaced. Even these are of poor quality, however, and have deteriorated in places from lack of maintenance. About 1,000 kilometers of roads are all-weather loose surface (gravel and laterite), and another 600 kilometers have had some grading. Bridges are rare. In the wetter south, normal vehicular travel almost ceases during the height of the rainy season from July to October. Land connections to the north and to other remote areas are along unimproved dirt tracks that are easily passable only for all-wheel-drive vehicles, camel caravans, and other draft animals. []

Airfields

Chad's principal airfield, at N'Djamena, with a 2,800-meter concrete runway, serves as a main international facility for central Africa. A second large, hard-surfaced airfield has been constructed by Libya near the border in the Aozou Strip. At least two other airfields (Sarh and Moundou) have macadam or laterite surfaces that can support medium-transport operations. The numerous smaller airfields have mainly graded earth surfaces; many are suitable only for occasional light aircraft and are temporarily unusable after rains. []

Effects of Geographic Conditions on Current Military Operations

The fighting between the Libyan-backed dissidents and Habre's forces has so far been in the northern desert area, where there are relatively few restrictions on vehicular movement along existing tracks or on air operations. The desert tracks, including those leading south from Al Kufra and Sabah in Libya to Faya-Largeau, are generally passable for heavy, wheeled transporters carrying armored vehicles and supplies. Transportation disruptions, however, are frequent:

- A mechanized Libyan unit following a track through a sandy area north of Faya-Largeau in mid-August was seriously slowed by the difficult terrain, []
- Farther south, following rains, government forces have had to cope with miry spots and water-filled wadis on tracks radiating from N'Djamena and Abeche.
- Air resupply to both government and Libyan-supported forces as well as Libyan air attacks have been impeded for brief periods by haze and dust-storms. []

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Faya-Largeau, population less than 10,000, is the largest oasis in northern Chad. Palm trees, laced with a network of dirt streets, shade most of the urban area and extend beyond the town to the east and west.



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